

The Autonomy of the Comic: On Kierkegaard and Don Quixote

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Among the many topics in Kierkegaard's writings, *Don Quixote* is certainly not a major one. Whereas this famous character plays a central role in the work of several authors, this is definitely not the case with Kierkegaard, whose work only reveals a secondary presence of Cervantes' novel. Nevertheless, we do find some interesting reflections on the *Quixote*. Not only does Kierkegaard mention the main characters of the novel several times, but he also develops a number of more detailed analyses which seem to invite us to reconsider the role of *Don Quixote* in his work.

Does this mean that we could propose a revolutionary reading according to which *Don Quixote* was depicted as an important and unjustly forgotten topic in Kierkegaard? No. *Don Quixote* does not deserve this consideration, and it is not my aim to propose such an outlandish interpretation. But by the same token, it is not my aim either to deal with a question that has nothing to offer but the poor merit of being one of the few topics in Kierkegaard's work that has not yet been thoroughly studied. Despite being a minor subject, *Don Quixote* might be useful for discussion and understanding of a major question in the work of Kierkegaard. This is precisely the aim of this paper: to make use of Cervantes' character as a *guide* for the comic. If it works, *Don Quixote* will become not only an occasion for bringing up this central question, but also a key for interpreting it.

I will divide the paper into three parts: first, I will briefly present a context in which to set Kierkegaard's reception of *Don Quixote*; second, I will enter an analysis of this novel's presence in the work of Kierkegaard; third, I will confront Kierkegaard's reading of *Don Quixote* with the romantics.

1. Which Quixote?

When discussing *Don Quixote*, there always arises the difficulty of knowing what exactly it is about, for the *Quixote* has received the most diverse interpretations. Therefore, it is not irrelevant to shed some light on the subject before beginning to analyze the presence of this novel in the work of Kierkegaard.

Broadly speaking, the *Quixote* has received four major interpretations: first, it was considered as a basically burlesque book; second, it was praised as a model of civilized satire and acclaimed as an elegant classic that already "assumed a 'serious air'" and "avoided the 'low' burlesque;"¹ third, it was interpreted as a modernist masterpiece that featured the romantic sensibility *avant la lettre*; fourth, it was read from a critical and academic perspective by interpreters who tried to set the novel in its own context.

It is not difficult to discover the origins of these multiple interpretations. The novel itself features and mixes such different elements as flesh or excrements and religiousness or ascetic ideals. What is to be done with this contrast? Should we pick up one of those various elements and then interpret the others by referring them to it as a sort of *Archimedean point*? At least, this is what traditionally has been done: for example, Cervantes' contemporaries focused on the burlesque level and regarded any reference to Don Quixote's spirituality as a means to emphasize the satire upon the character; by contrast, the romantic interpreters considered the novel as a completely serious enterprise in which burlesque was solely apparent.

What happens with all these possible readings when it comes to Kierkegaard? Which one is *his Quixote*? Is there also an *Archimedean point* in his interpretation of the book? We should give two different answers: the first one, on the *Quixote* that Kierkegaard received, i.e., those readings which were influential for his reception of the novel; the second answer deals with Kierkegaard's stance in regard to this diversity of readings. The latter will be discussed later; the former must be provided before starting the analysis of Kierkegaard's reception of the novel.

As a nineteenth century author, Kierkegaard was influenced by the "romantic approach" to *Don Quixote*. Kierkegaard used Heinrich Heine's edition of the novel (along with a Danish one by C. D. Biehl)² and the atmosphere created around the *Quixote* by the romantics was likely what attracted Kierkegaard's attention to Cervantes' novel.

This romantic approach should be understood in contrast with previous interpretations, especially with those which stressed the *immanent* dimension of the novel, i.e., those interpretations which read it as a mere

satire which by means of burlesque aimed solely to make fun of books of chivalry and amuse the reader. A significant group of romantic authors, primarily in Germany, reacted against this reading, not being satisfied with the eighteenth century recognition of the novel as a masterpiece of sophisticated satire. According to the romantics, a mere satire – no matter how good it was – never would have remained a classic in the way *Don Quixote* did, unless it was *something else* than funny adventures of a well-portrayed character. Therefore, these authors began to develop their new interpretations in order to *correct* the “simplistic” previous ones. Not only did they do so but, moreover, they became so zealously devoted to this task that they ended up denying any connection between burlesque and a *true reading* of the novel. In general, they all moved *Don Quixote* to a completely different level, a symbolic one. Within this symbolism, the novel was interpreted as expressing ideas about the human spirit or the Spanish nature. It goes without saying that all these ideas were those of the romantics, and that the symbolism was understood in terms of a romantic (modern) sensibility.³

What made this new interpretation arise in Romanticism? On the one hand, the nineteenth century readers were not within the actual context of Cervantes’ satiric purposes. Chivalric novels had disappeared long before and so the funny contrast with them, obvious for a contemporary reader of the novel, would not be apparent anymore. Furthermore, “Cervantes made little use of the easy comic formulae which lay at hand in the types of the macaronic knight and the *miles gloriosus*, and chose a more mature kind of comedy based on the hero’s being plausibly able to visualise himself, from his own mad viewpoint, as a hero.”⁴ That created the ground for the romantic revolution.

There is an influence of this romantic approach to the *Quixote* in Kierkegaard, but we would get hold of a rather erroneous picture of his context if we limited ourselves to just this perspective. We should not ignore that, before this entire romantic reading, the novel had already enjoyed a great recognition, both critically and popularly, being read as burlesque; and this reading was present in Kierkegaard’s reception of the work as well.

In which *quixotic* context, then, should we set Kierkegaard? The answer has to be in a number of contexts, and not only one of them. Romanticism and Burlesque can be regarded as the two poles of a heterogeneous presence of *quixotic* readings in Kierkegaard. We would misunderstand Kierkegaard’s relation to *Don Quixote* if we interpreted it as being just within one framework. Far from being a failure of our purpose in finding

a *Quixote* for setting Kierkegaard's reception in context, this conclusion of a number of *Quixotes* provides us with an adequate ground for a proper interpretation.

2. The *Quixote* in Kierkegaard's writings

With the obvious risk of giving way to reductionism, we can divide Kierkegaard's sporadic references to the *Quixote* into three major groups: first, those in which Cervantes' character is used in order to illustrate something negative; second, those where the allusion is also made to exemplify something, but positive; and third, those where Kierkegaard makes some commentaries on the novel or just mentions it outside of any valuation of the character.

The most abundant references to Don Quixote (as well as his counterpart Sancho Panza⁵) are those in which there is a negative valuation. Most of them imply a very plain interpretation that seems to take Don Quixote's madness at face value. It is usual to find allusions to the character in which Kierkegaard makes use of the *cliché* in order to discredit something: "Eureka, I have it! The "professor is really the analog to Don Quixote. Perhaps he will become an even more profound comic figure" (*JP* 3, 3568; *Pap. X*² A 633). Nonetheless, we also find among the negative comments a number of more detailed reflections which clearly involve an analysis of the character as such. An example of these reflections can be Climacus' claim in the *Postscript* that "Don Quixote is the prototype of the subjective lunacy in which the passion of inwardness grasps a particular fixed finite idea" (*CUP* 195; *SKS* 7, 179).⁶ When it comes to such allusions, a sort of cross between two different traditions is made, since the character of Don Quixote is taken somewhat at face value but its *superficial* reading is made within the framework of a deeper interpretation. Thus, Kierkegaard takes an ambiguous position: he is within both the romantic tradition, as developing serious reflections on the work, and outside it, as referring to the character in a way typical of the conventional non-romantic interpretations.

The second group of references corresponds to those fragments in which Kierkegaard completely abandons the *cliché* of Don Quixote as a funny mad character and brings it to a completely new field.

Alas, when I look at my own life! How rare the man who is so endowed for the life of the spirit and above all so rigorously schooled with the help of spiritual suffering – in the eyes of all my contemporaries I am fighting

like a Don Quixote – it never occurs to them that it is Christianity; indeed, they are convinced of just the opposite (JP 2, 1781; Pap. X¹ A 646).

It becomes quite confusing when trying to link references such as this one with the interpretation featured in other entries. Burlesque has now vanished and, in return, we have a new conception really close to Unamuno's well-known "knight of faith." In other words, a *spiritual* interpretation arises, and Kierkegaard not only develops a *deeper* analysis *à la* romantic of the novel, but also transforms completely the mood of his reading, even to the point of identifying himself with the character. By means of this identification, he stresses the *serious* side of *Don Quixote*, as did Romanticism in general. All the comic situations featured in the novel are now regarded simply as an intensification of *Don Quixote's* suffering: not only does he have to suffer, because of the nature of his solitary task, but also he is mocked for it, and the mockery redoubles his suffering. Seriousness is the central aspect, and the comic has to be understood as depending on it; there is no trace of burlesque since every laugh at *Don Quixote* becomes a weeping.

It might seem that the identification with Don Quixote could be used to interpret the whole work of Kierkegaard, and not just the references to this particular subject. As a romantic emblem of existence, *Don Quixote* might arise as a key for reading Kierkegaard: the knight of faith, in his solitary strength, suffering the impossibility of being understood, who uses his humoristic outwardness as an *incognito* in order to preserve the authenticity of his religious inwardness. That could be a tempting interpretation, but we better think it through twice. The following entry will help us to reconsider both this seductive interpretation and the actual meaning of this turning point in Kierkegaard's reception of *Don Quixote*:

Christianity does not really exist. Christendom is waiting for a comic poet *a la* Cervantes, who will create a counterpart to Don Quixote out of the essentially Christian.

The only difference will be that no poetic exaggerations will be required at all, as in Don Quixote – no, all he needs to do is to take any essentially true Christian life, not to mention simply taking Christ or an apostle. The comic element arises because the age has changed so enormously that it regards this as comic.

That a person actually is earnest about renouncing this life, literally, that he *voluntarily* gives up the happiness of erotic love offered to him, that he endures all kinds of earthly privation, although the opposite is offered to

him, that he thus exposes himself to all the anguish of spiritual trial [*Anfægtelse*], for spiritual trial comes only to the voluntary – and then that he, suffering all this, submits to being mistreated for it, hated, persecuted, scorned (the unavoidable consequence of essential Christianity in this world) – to our entire age such a life appear to be comic. It is a Don Quixote life (*JP* 2, 1762; *Pap.* X² A 32).

The two aforementioned valuations of *Don Quixote*, a negative and a positive one, seem to come together when we read this passage. On the one hand, Cervantes' character still stands as a model of ludicrousness that exemplifies what not to do. But, on the other hand, it also arises as a result for every individual who lives his life authentically, i.e., christianly. At first, it seems that this conclusion might depend upon the particular circumstances of “our age,” but Kierkegaard takes care of stressing that to be “hated, persecuted, scorned” is “the unavoidable consequence of essential Christianity in this world.” Therefore, the only thing that depends upon “our age” is the fact of being regarded as something comic, but still that “unavoidable consequence” is closely connected to *Don Quixote*, and so the character remains an illustration of both sides.

There is still a third group within our systematization of Kierkegaard's use of *Don Quixote*, and it is the one formed by specific reflections on the work or its characters. Here, we find again Kierkegaard close to his romantic contemporaries as a *Quixote* reader. Before considering these references, we must bear in mind that some of them don't have very much to say as far as an interpretation of *Don Quixote* is concerned. It is not important that he wonders about the absence of a feminine *Don Quixote* or makes comments on the different stages of Don Quixote's madness (*EO* 256–57, *SKS* 2, 249; *SLW* 402, *SKS* 6, 373)⁷ – it is not important if we are looking for an interpretation of the work, but it lets us know that Kierkegaard did not intend to develop such an interpretation. Thus, we can subdivide these references into two further groups, the first one being formed by the entries that show Kierkegaard as an ordinary reader of the *Quixote*, whose comments do not arise from an interest in the novel itself but from the question it represents, i.e., the comic. But let us put this group aside and focus now on the references that do require a more specific analysis.

In an entry from 1847, Kierkegaard complains about “a sad mistake for Cervantes to end *Don Quixote* by making him sensible and letting him die.” As an alternative, he proposes that the book should continue with “an infinite series of new fixed ideas,” which would bring the novel to the “roman-

tic conclusion (that there is no conclusion)” (JP 1, 771; SKS 20, NB:170). Later on, he insists upon the same idea:

It is a mistake that Don Quixote ends by dying and dies as a rational man. Don Quixote ought to have no ending. On the contrary, Don Quixote ought to end with the momentum of a new fixed idea, in which he would now appear, as he himself says, as a shepherd. Don Quixote is endless fantasy. Therefore it is prosaic to let the story end with his dying after he has become sensible. It is an attempt to transform Don Quixote into a kind of moral tale instead of keeping it properly in the realm of romantic comedy (JP 2, 1562; Pap. X¹ A 501).

Now Kierkegaard is more explicit and does not hesitate to take possession of the character, sharing the well-known romantic claim that Cervantes’ contemporaries (or even Cervantes himself) did not understand the *Quixote*.⁸ “Don Quixote is endless fantasy,” says Kierkegaard, who supposedly has got to the core of its true understanding and therefore knows how the novel should end – in contrast with Cervantes, who betrayed his own creation.

This is not the occasion to discuss whether Cervantes really *betrayed* the spirit of his character and Kierkegaard is right in claiming that the novel was transformed into “a kind of moral tale.”⁹ Be that as it may, we must now concentrate on the fact that in making this claim, Kierkegaard places himself in a romantic framework.

However, we must be cautious with this conclusion. We cannot forget that Kierkegaard’s approach to the *Quixote* also includes readings of a completely different kind. Therefore, we would misunderstand his reception of the novel if we claimed that it coincides with the romantics’, because it does not. Kierkegaard does occasionally appropriate the *Quixote*, and sometimes he develops a strongly romantic reading, but he is far from being just another romantic interpreter. Romanticism in Kierkegaard is only one element of a heterogeneous reading that also includes different non-romantic valuations of the *Quixote*, especially that of burlesque. By stressing too much the romantic influence, we would not do justice to Kierkegaard’s reception of the novel. What is worse, this one-sided perspective would lead us to misunderstand the major question linked to *Don Quixote* in Kierkegaard: the comic.

In Search of Unity

Finding an explanation to all these heterogeneous allusions to *Don Quixote* is a difficult task. The first possibility to cross our minds is to think that Kierkegaard might simply have changed his interpretation through the years. According to this possibility, we might be able to argue that Kierkegaard alluded to *Don Quixote* based on a superficial conception of the character. Later on, he began to develop his own conception, and, in this way, his references to the work became more thorough and profound. But it is not that easy: if we just take a look at the different entries and compare both their dates and the contexts in which they are located, we will prove that the heterogeneous comments on *Don Quixote* follow each other without any kind of order, let alone evolution.

We might be tempted to think, then, that perhaps there is simply no reason for searching a Kierkegaardian understanding of the *Quixote*. Maybe we should consider *Don Quixote* in the work of Kierkegaard as neither more nor less than what it looks like: a stylistic device used occasionally just to give more expressiveness to certain ideas which by no means imply a personal interpretation of the novel. Moreover, this would be an incoherent stylistic device, since it is used to illustrate opposite ideas. If this were the case, then we should just give up *Don Quixote* and turn our attention to some other subject.

That would be a great mistake. It is true that Kierkegaard is not a thorough critic of the novel, nor does he create one of his paradigmatic figures out of Don Quixote, as he does, for example, with Don Juan or Abraham. In these cases, there is a particular interest in analyzing what Kierkegaard has to say about them, for they function as models for specific “theories” in his work, i.e., they represent concrete positions; but this does not happen with Don Quixote.¹⁰ And yet there is a great interest for paying attention to Don Quixote’s presence: he is simply the paradigm of a comic character.

As we have seen before, Don Quixote had become the comic character *par excellence* in Kierkegaard’s time. It was not only the romantics who brought the novel to the highest range of recognition; it still enjoyed popular and *vulgar* success. In this way, Kierkegaard’s diverse allusions to *Don Quixote* do not call into question the character’s status as a reference for the comic; on the contrary, they confirm it.

The diversity into which the entries on *Don Quixote* are dispersed is not chaotic; the different valuations that are made of this character do not correspond to a capricious, constantly changing opinion, nor to an attitude of

total indifference and thoughtlessness. Kierkegaard takes Don Quixote from the tradition and makes use of it simply as what it is, a comic model. Therefore, the variety of readings and valuations corresponds to the same variety that the comic has in the work of Kierkegaard. As with the multiple conceptions of *Don Quixote* analyzed above, the comic is also a continuous element that is always changing and can be regarded from different viewpoints, from the lowest levels to the highest ones.

As we follow Kierkegaard's treatment of the comic, we can see that he is well aware of this ambiguity. In order to shed some light on this ambiguity, he develops concepts such as *Humor* [*Humor*] or *Irony* [*Ironi*], together with *the Comic* itself as a concept [*det Comiske*].¹¹ He attributes to each concept a series of concrete characteristics that seem to place them in concrete positions where their proper meaning is contained and limited, but, in fact, behind this, the comic remains a hidden and invariable continuity. "The matter is very simple. The comic is present in every stage of life (*except that the position is different*), because where there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comic is present" (CUP 513-514; SKS 7, 465).

We need to be cautious with this continuity of the comic. It is true that Kierkegaard expressly speaks of it, when placing it as parallel to the continuity of contradiction in existence (CUP 523; SKS 7, 475). Yet, he also explicitly excludes the comic from the religious (CUP 461-62; SKS 7, 419), apparently breaking the continuity and falling into a contradiction. But there is no contradiction and its appearance is precisely just another consequence of the continuous presence of the comic. To get out of this tangle, we need to get into the dialectic of the comic.

According to Kierkegaard, there is no contradiction in the religious, therefore the comic is excluded. But a religious individual is not religiousness itself, and between these two there is the big gap of existence. A religious individual, no matter how deep his religiousness may be, is always *existing* and, as long as he exists, the comic recovers its place. For this reason the comic is always present, "in every stage of life." According to Climacus, the only place where it could claim to be excluded has to be where contradiction cannot be found, and this is only possible in pure abstraction since "where there is life there is contradiction." Yet, ironically, the person who tries this possibility and devotes himself to pure abstraction becomes the most comical one, by forgetting himself (CUP 145; SKS 7, 135).

Thus, the comic permeates every "stage of life," as well as every stage of Kierkegaard's thought. It is present when he mocks the kind of thinking he

wants to avoid and when he develops his own. And there is still another level in the development of the comic in Kierkegaard's writings. If we follow the display of the concept as he presents it, we will also end up discovering the presence of the comic in the form of the Kierkegaardian discourse. In fact, this final step is nothing but a coherent continuation of all what has been developed before, and it does not imply any external complement to the concept itself. On the contrary, the concept is confirmed. Thus, to discover the whole work of Kierkegaard as a practice in the comic and to understand the treatment of his concept of the comic amount to the same thing.¹²

Returning to *Don Quixote*, what does that small group of references tell us about this treatment of the comic? First, it is an excellent example of the changing status of the comic. And not only we can follow the different stages of the comic within the works of Kierkegaard by following *Don Quixote's* presence, but also, and more interesting, we can use Cervantes' novel to show Kierkegaard's work as a comic narrative.

The *Postscript*: a Philosophical Quixote?

I believe it could be a very interesting idea to work out a comic novel, "A literary *Don Quixote*." A complete misunderstanding of the significance of books has developed in the learned world. Instead of their being regarded as a necessary supplement to life, primary stress is placed on reading as many as possible. The comic would then lie in the hopeless struggle to "go along with this" and, paralleling this, in the absolute failure, nevertheless, of accomplishing anything in the world, because the learned people are forever producing learned works and losing themselves in footnotes (*JP* 1, 770; *Pap.* I A 146).

Kierkegaard wrote the above early in 1836. It seems that the idea of repeating Cervantes' enterprise might have left a deep impression on him. Later on, in a passage from *Either/Or*, he insisted on the idea of "others" *Quixote* by wondering about a "feminine version" of the novel.¹³ And he did not stop there, for ten years after the entry quoted, Johannes Climacus repeated in the *Postscript*: "and just as the age of chivalry actually concluded with *Don Quixote* (the comic conception is always the concluding one), a poet, by comically eternalizing such an unfortunate servant of the letter in his tragic-comic romanticism, could still make it plain that literalist theology is something of the past" (*CUP* 35; *SKS* 7, 42).

We can think that Kierkegaard considered *repeating* the *Quixote* himself. If we go back again to the *Postscript*, we will see why such an idea sounded attractive to him: “By beginning straightway with ethical categories against the objective tendency, one does wrong and fails to hit the mark, because one has nothing in common with the attacked. But by remaining within the metaphysical, one can employ the comic, which also lies in the metaphysical sphere, in order to overtake such a transfigured professor” (*CUP* 124; *SKS* 7, 119).¹⁴

There is no doubt that Kierkegaard’s aim was to “overtake such a transfigured professor.” But this is not an easy task. An effort that seeks to put abstract thought within its limits must be cautious: there is the risk of falling into the trap of fostering the huge power of abstraction playing its game, although “with a critic.” In other words, such effort has to know how to reflect its purpose *artistically* in the form of the expression and avoid becoming a footnote to the system that it criticizes.

In order to carry out this complex task, Kierkegaard, by means of Johannes Climacus, chose a comic writing as the most adequate strategy. He elaborated his work in contrast to those of speculative philosophy, in a way very close to Cervantes’ novel as a parody of novels of chivalry. Fulfilling his own demand, Kierkegaard created an elaborated philosophical *Quixote*, which, like Cervantes’ original novel, continually played with the contemporary presence of the two elements, the comic and seriousness. Thus, the *Postscript* became not only a parody of philosophy but, at the same time, a form of philosophy.

The presence of the comic can be seen as early as in the title: the work is presented as *definitive, concluding* [*afsluttende*] and *unscientific, non-academic* [*uvidenskabelig*] but it is minutely constructed with the most systematic style, which, in the end, rejects itself! Climacus enters the way of academic philosophy, climbs up the ladder of rational thought but, at the end, asks the reader to throw it away (*CUP* 619; *SKS* 7, 562). It is not difficult to understand why Kierkegaard chose the comic to build his attack against speculative thought. He just followed his own advice, “to remain within the metaphysical” in order to collide with abstract thought and “overtake it.”

Reading *Don Quixote*, we find a similar advice in the words of Cervantes’ friend in the prologue. This suggestion of *an anonymous friend*¹⁵ responds to Cervantes’ doubts about writing the prologue to his *Quixote* and publishing the novel:

All that you have to do is to make proper use of imitation in what you write, and the more perfect the imitation the better will your writing be. Inasmuch as you have no other object in view than that of overthrowing the authority and prestige which books of chivalry enjoy in the world at large and among the vulgar, there is no reason why you should go begging maxims of the philosophers, counsels of Holy Writ, fables of the poets, orations of the rhetoricians, or miracles of the saints; see to it, rather, that your style flows along smoothly, pleasingly, and sonorously, and that your words are the proper ones, meaningful and well placed, expressive of your intention in setting them down and of what you wish to say, without any intricacy or obscurity.

Let it be your aim that, by reading your story, the melancholy may be moved to laughter and the cheerful man made merrier still; let the simple not be bored, but may the clever admire your originality; let the grave ones not despise you, but let the prudent praise you. And keep in mind, above all, your purpose, which is that of undermining the illfounded edifice that is constituted by those books of chivalry, so abhorred by many but admired by many more; if you succeed in attaining it, you will have accomplished no little.¹⁶

The coincidence is not incidental. When it comes to the comic, the works of Kierkegaard and Cervantes show several parallels. Firstly, we find in Cervantes (let us limit ourselves to *Don Quixote*) the same changing mood that we find in Kierkegaard. In the latter it has already been shown; in the former, it is perhaps not so obvious, but the “revolution” of the romantic interpretations has made clear enough that the work of Cervantes has plenty of *spiritual* and *serious* material, together with the obvious burlesque, which cannot be denied either, despite the romantics’ effort on this matter.¹⁷

Secondly, one of the favourite literary devices of the Dane, pseudonymity, is used by Cervantes in his novel in a way that really resembles what Kierkegaard developed in works such as *Either/Or* or *Stages in Life’s Way*. Both authors not only use pseudonyms but, furthermore, they complement this use with the story of having found some papers – the very books they are writing – in curious circumstances (in a market place, a writing desk in a second-hand shop or at the bottom of a lake) with such a close resemblance that it should lead, if not to suspicions, then at least to think of some kind of relationship. It is unimportant whether Cervantes used this device as a satiric allusion to novels of chivalry or not.¹⁸ The thing is *how* he makes

use of it, how he – like Kierkegaard – plays with it to mix literature and reality and create in the reader an effect of confusion.¹⁹

A point of particular interest is the reception that both works had in their respective traditions. Being burlesque literature, *Don Quixote* has been traditionally read far beyond burlesque. There is no need to mention that Climacus' *Postscript* has been primarily read and praised as a major work of philosophy, while very few scholars have stressed its comic dimension.²⁰ Were the majority of interpreters wrong when reading both works? Not necessarily. Both Cervantes and Kierkegaard, by means of Johannes Climacus, did not limit themselves to mere burlesque works, although they certainly wrote burlesque. Cervantes' "more mature kind of comedy" gave rise to *serious* readings such as the romantics', who obviously did not create their interpretations out of pure fantasy. Similarly, the *Postscript* tried to destroy mockingly all the speculative fantasies while, performing a balance act, showing with *serious* philosophy the right way to choose.

What I mean to suggest by pointing to these resemblances is just that there is a similar treatment of the comic in Kierkegaard and Cervantes. Both authors believe in the value and interest of a simultaneous presence of seriousness and the comic, and furthermore, they also make use of very similar literary devices, or even the same ones. All this is not due to any hidden connection between them, let alone the bizarre possibility of "plagiarism," but simply because the two of them share a common conception of the comic.

3. Si sale cara, gano yo; si sale cruz, pierdes tú²¹: Romanticism on Don Quixote and the comic.

There is a clear gap between Kierkegaard and the romantics, which is sometimes openly expressed by Kierkegaard himself. Nevertheless, it is also true that he elaborates his work in the framework of Romanticism, and the topic of *Don Quixote* can be regarded as an example of this influence. Yet, this topic can be also considered as an illustration of the very opposite. What I intend to do now is to use *Don Quixote* to analyze the differences between Kierkegaard's and the romantics' conceptions of the comic.

A good point of departure can be Kierkegaard's own analyses in the early work *On the Concept of Irony*. Here, he develops an open criticism of a number of romantic authors in regard to irony, which is a particular form of the comic. Since, as we have seen, *Don Quixote* has to be regarded as a paradigm of the comic character, I propose to use Kierkegaard's points in *On the Concept of Irony* to bring our *quixotic* conclusions to the question of

the relation between Kierkegaard and the romantics in regard to the comic.

Throughout *On the Concept of Irony* there is an opposition between an authentic irony, repeatedly linked to Socrates, and romantic irony. In both cases, Kierkegaard refers to irony as a negative power that annihilates the whole reality and makes room for a new principle but, whereas Socratic irony is just limited to the negative power of annihilation, romantic irony arises as a power that also establishes itself the new principle (CI 275; SKS 1, 311-312). Here we find a parallel with the romantic turn in *Don Quixote's* interpretation. Let us look at it.

The “romantic approach” denied the novel’s satiric purposes, believing rather in a rich symbolism. Subsequently, this symbolism was interpreted from a context outside Cervantes’ and closely related to the romantic sensibility. In this way, either Cervantes was three centuries ahead his own time or, if not, then we will have to claim that the Romanticism *confiscated*²² *Don Quixote*, turning all the burlesque of the novel into a mere stage of the novel’s “real” and *serious* purpose. This second possibility may not sound so attractive, but it is certainly more believable.

Where did the origins of this *confiscation* come from? We could first refer to the particular circumstances of the work. As we saw, in the nineteenth century, the context of novels of chivalry had completely disappeared, and, on the other hand, the complex and mature treatment of the comic developed by Cervantes suggested almost any possible interpretation within the comic spectrum. Thus, it could be a natural consequence for the romantics to make their own appropriation of the novel since it offered material enough to do so and its commitment to burlesque had become easier to ignore. This explanation does make sense. But perhaps these particular circumstances were not so decisive after all and we would do better to search for some other explanation, such as the particular conception of the comic that lies behind and causes this *confiscation*.

According to *On the Concept of Irony*, Romanticism transformed the authentic status of irony by turning it into a dependent stage of the speculative. This difference is expressed earlier in the work by means of an analysis of Plato’s dialogues. Kierkegaard starts by referring to “Schleiermacher’s division between the dialogues in which the dialogical is the main element and the tireless irony at times disentangles, at times tangles, the disputation and the disputants, and the constructive dialogues, which are characterized by an objective, methodological style” (CI 53; SKS 1, 113). Then, he links the first kind of dialogues with *the Socratic*, and the second one with *the Pla-*

tonic. This division leads to two different kinds of dialectic and irony: "The one is the quickening force integral to the investigation; the other arrogates, if possible, lordship to itself" (CI 87; SKS 1, 144).²³ It scarcely needs saying that the former is Socrates' irony. The most important feature of it is its *total endeavor* (CI 122; SKS 1, 174), which means that irony not only annihilates the whole reality, but this annihilation includes also irony itself (CI 56; SKS 1, 116). On its opposite, we have romantic irony, which cancels all actuality but, far from annihilating itself, it also establishes the new actuality (CI 290, 322-323; SKS 1, 325, 352). Thus the "absolute negativity" of irony gets transformed into a relative stage of a serious and constructive enterprise. In other words, irony gets *confiscated*.

Both confiscations of the *Quixote* and irony are due to a conception of the comic peculiar of Romanticism. This conception has its roots in the Renaissance. Let us take a look at this. After the Middle Ages, when laughter was broadly censored, the comic was recovered as a positive phenomenon and, thus, a new comic theory aroused. Whereas diverse authors from ancient Greece and Rome were read and praised, only one author monopolized the discussions when it came to the development of this comic theory: the Roman Terence.²⁴ Why this one-sided influence? As in the case of the romantics' transformation of *Don Quixote*, some historical reasons could be claimed: Terence was a poet of the *New Comedy*,²⁵ which dealt mainly with universal matters of human relations, whereas the *Old Comedy* was closely connected with the particular social and political circumstances of ancient Athens. In this way, it could be tempting to claim that simply because of these historical circumstances the *New Comedy* became more attractive for the Renaissance authors. But, as in the case of romantic quixotism, there are also reasons to doubt such simple explanation and think about some other causes:

Why did Terentian comedy monopolize the sixteenth-century discussion of comic theory? Aristophanes is certainly a greater poet than Terence, and Plautus is certainly a much livelier comedian. Both Aristophanes and Plautus were read, admired, and imitated in the Renaissance [...] Nevertheless, so far as I can discover, the sixteenth-century critics may have liked Aristophanes and Plautus, but they distrusted them. The Athenian Aristophanes was too vulgar, too indelicate; the Roman Plautus was sometimes too vulgar and often too "irregular." The later Roman poet, Terence, offered safer and more familiar ground upon which schoolmasters and critics could expatiate on art, on manners, and on morals.²⁶

Why did Aristophanes' conception of the comic -for example- not play a significant role in the development of the Modern conception of the comic that arose in the Renaissance? Was it because of the particular historical circumstances or rather because of the implications of his use of the comic as a destabilizing power? Modernity recovered the comic, but submitting it to the new supreme principle of reason and the *order* that it established. Therefore, the comic could not be present as an ambiguous element outside this order of Modern reason; on the contrary, it had to be *controlled* by it. Consequently, to develop a new conception of the comic, Modernity focused on the comicalness that best enabled such control. By choosing Terence's model and creating its comic conception out of it, Modernity *confiscated* the experience of the comic.

If we regard this new conception as the background of the romantic interpretations, then the particular *confiscations* of both *Don Quixote* and irony come to a new light. Far from simply referring to historical circumstances, they take place within a particular comic conception which led the romantics to ignore the ambiguity and duplicity of Cervantes' novel and, as it goes with the proverb that entitles this paragraph, to transform them into a mirage by focusing just on the serious dimension of the novel. Likewise, they turned irony into a controlled element of a serious order.

Is this also Kierkegaard's conception of the comic? No. He is somewhat influenced by modern authors, but his use of the comic lies far from the modern conception of it. Kierkegaard turns rather to a pre-modern conception,²⁷ in which the comic is regarded as an autonomous element capable of giving expression of the "contradictory and doubled-faced fullness of life."²⁸ In his work, we do not find any *confiscation* but, rather, the comic in its *total endeavor* (CI 122; SKS 1, 174), i.e., a comic experience that does not become a controlled element, but, on the contrary, it expresses its own truth, "since the comic must, of course, have some truth in it" (CI 145; SKS 1, 195).

This is the conception of the comic that the presence of *Don Quixote* in the work of Kierkegaard implies. To demonstrate that it corresponds to the whole presence of the comic in the work of Kierkegaard, i.e., that *Don Quixote* is a credible perspective would require a more complete study but, nevertheless, what we have seen here seems to suggest the validity of such perspective and, furthermore, the significance that this conception of the comic could have for a true reading of the whole work of Kierkegaard. But this, of course, is far beyond what we can do with *Don Quixote*.

Notes

1. Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to 'Don Quixote.'* *A Critical History of the Romantic Tradition in 'Quixote' Criticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 13.
2. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote von La Mancha*, 2 vols., Stuttgart, 1837; *Don Quixote af Manchas Levnet og Bedrifter*, 4 vols., Copenhagen, 1776-77 (Ktl. 1935-36; 1937-40, *Auktionsprotokol over Søren Kierkegaards bogsamling*, ed., H. P. Rohde, Copenhagen, Det kongelige Bibliotek, 1967). Heine's edition of *Don Quixote* was the canonical version that made possible the novel's spread in the romantic German speaking world. Contrary to what has been sometimes claimed (for example, R. Grimsley's note on Cervantes in *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 9, or the above quoted Rohde's catalogue of Kierkegaard's library), Heinrich Heine was not the translator of *Don Quixote* into German, but only responsible for the introduction (cf. J.-J.A. Bertrand, *Cervantes et le romantisme allemand*, Paris, Librairie Félix Alcan, 1914, p. 578). The Danish *Quixote* translation by the writer and translator Charlotte Dorothea Biehl was published in 1777 for the first time.
3. "If myth is a fable about the origins of culture, then the modern age may justly be said to have converted *Don Quixote* into a myth, and Cervantes into the Prometheus who bequeathed to it the modern novel" (Anthony Close, *Cervantes and the Comic Mind of his Age*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 1).
4. Close, *The Romantic Approach*, p. 248.
5. Kierkegaard limits his allusions to Sancho to the episode of the "self-administered blows to his own bottom," which is used in different occasions in order to give an example of a "fraud" (see *JP* 1, 188; *Pap.* X2 A 396 on Kantian rigorism, and *JP* 4, 3902; *Pap.* X4 A 412 on self-knowledge).
6. The same idea had already been developed in detail in an early entry from the Journals (*JP* 1, 416; *SKS* 17, AA:14).
7. It is not true that "there is no female counterpart to Don Quixote in all European literature" (*EO* 256-57; *SKS* 2, 249). In 1752 Charlotte Lennox had published *The Female Don Quixote or the Adventures of Arabella*, a novel that tried to "repeat" Cervantes' satire upon French heroic romances.
8. In this regard, there are basically two different critical positions: those who place Cervantes as a kind of prefiguration for the romantic author, a genius advanced to his age who wrote a work that his contemporaries were unable to understand, and one step beyond, there are the interpretations such as Unamuno's, who claimed that even Cervantes himself was not able to understand *Don Quixote*.
9. Nevertheless, I do not want to continue without saying something about this claim. It is difficult to explain why Cervantes let Don Quixote die sane, and there are some elements *outside* the novel that might have much to do with his decision, such as the declared interest in avoiding other sequels like Avellaneda's (i.e., a betrayal of *Don Quixote's* spirit). Leaving this question aside, and being Don Quixote's dead the actual end of the novel, I want to call attention to the so-called "moral" of this end. It is at least an open question whether Cervantes really puts an end to Don Quixote's madness by letting him die after becoming sane. We should not overlook details such as the significant epitaph of Sansón Carrasco, which seems to stress and "interpret" the fact that Don Quixote's death is precisely an end to any possibility of *confiscating* Don Quixote (I will refer later to this term), but not an end to his transgressive power. After all, it is Alonso Quijano el Bueno who *dies*, not Don Quixote (see also James Iffland, *De fiestas y aguafiestas: risa, locura e ideología en Cervantes y Avellaneda*, Madrid, Universidad de Navarra, 1999, p. 547-568).

10. Eric J. Ziolkowski explains this difference in terms of the well-known “theory of stages.” According to his reading, Don Quixote “embodies a principle [the comic] that is present in every stage,” which makes Cervantes’ character an attractive figure for Kierkegaard (Eric J. Ziolkowski, “Don Quixote and Kierkegaard’s Understanding of the Single Individual in Society,” in *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community. Religion, Ethics and Politics in Kierkegaard*, ed. George B. Connell, C. Stephen Evans, Atlantic Highlands NJ, Humanities Press, 1992, p. 132).
11. In fact, Kierkegaard’s use of concepts has the very opposite aim. Contrary to a rationalistic fashion, in which concepts are meant to clarify things for the reader, Kierkegaard’s concepts play with their own status: they disguise as clarifying but, actually, they frequently confuse the reader who wants to remain within the concepts, while, at the same time, they do *clarify* something to the one who becomes aware of the concepts’ limits. A good example of this can be found in Roger Poole’s analysis of Vigilius Haufniensis’ *The Concept of Anxiety* (Roger Poole, “ ‘Dizziness, Falling...Oh (Dear)!...’ Reading *Begrebet Angest* for the Very First Time,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2001*, eds., N.J. Cappelørn, H. Deuser and J. Stewart, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2001, pp. 199-219).
12. It is not possible to demonstrate here the claim that the whole work of Kierkegaard can be interpreted from the viewpoint of the comic; this lies far beyond the possibilities of this paper. Nevertheless, it has to be somehow claimed, since it is implied by the understanding of the comic that the topic of *Don Quixote* can help to develop.
13. See note 7.
14. See also *CI* 249; *SKS* 1, 288.
15. It is obviously a split of Cervantes himself, who plays with his own personality as author like Kierkegaard/Climacus does in the *Postscript*.
16. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans., Samuel Putnam, 2 vols., New York, The Viking Press, 1949; vol. 1, pp. 15-16.
17. This was precisely the problem with many of the romantic interpretations of the novel, which fell into a new form of reductionism by focusing solely on the non-superficial dimension of the work. It is obvious that the novel contained burlesque, which, on the other hand, does not necessarily eliminate its seriousness. As Anthony Close puts it, “Cervantes has written a satiric burlesque which so refines the potentialities of the genre that it acquires the roundness, the inclusiveness, the poetry, and the seriousness-in-levity of great comedy. The unclassical lesson that he teaches is that there are no pure and no low genres. Once that has been said, it scarcely needs saying that to interpret *Don Quixote* as a burlesque comedy is not necessarily to hold an impoverished view of it as a work of art, nor to reduce the critical problems that may be raised about it to an elementary level” (Close, *The Romantic Approach*, p. 28).
18. The authors of these novels also claimed to have found some papers with the stories they told, in order to make these stories be regarded as veridical or even historical facts. The same kind of device would be found again in many novelists in the eighteenth century, especially in French literature (Rousseau, Marivaux, Laclós, etc.).
19. This confusion becomes intensified in the second part of *Don Quixote*, by making the characters themselves comment upon the first part of the novel. There is no intention in Cervantes to make the reader believe that his book tells actual facts, as the books of chivalry did, but, on the contrary, he tries to create confusion. It bears a significant resemblance to Kierkegaard’s literary creation, which, contrary to the eighteenth century authors above mentioned, does not intend to pedagogically or moralistically clarify anything to the reader, but rather to *socratically* confuse him.

20. Among the few, the following deserve to be highlighted: Andrew J. Burgess, "A Word-Experiment on the Category of the Comic," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary to The Corsair Affair*, ed., Robert L. Perkins, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1990, pp. 85-121; Hugh S. Pyper, "Beyond a Joke: Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as a comic book," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary to Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed., Robert L. Perkins, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1997, pp. 149-167; Richard Keller Simon, "Transcendental Buffoonery: Kierkegaard as Comedian," in *The Labyrinth of the Comic. Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud*, Tallahassee, University of Florida Press, 1985, pp. 78-116.
21. "Heads, I win; tails, you loose," Spanish proverb.
22. I suggest *confiscation* as our own common term to interpret both romantic quixotism and Kierkegaard's analysis of irony. I take the term initially from the French historian Jacques Heers, who uses it for his study on Carnival. According to Heers, after the Middle Ages a process starts that would turn the destabilizing power of Carnival into an inoffensive one, controlled by aristocracy and the establishment; as he puts it, the fest gets *confiscated* (Jacques Heers, *Fêtes des fous et carnivals*, Paris, Fayard, 1983). But the term is also used by other authors with very close meanings. By using this particular term, I suggest to link both the critical reading of romantic quixotism and Kierkegaard's analysis of irony to the broader question of the *Modern conception* of the comic. In this way, the term *confiscation* provides a perspective from which to interpret these analyses while, at the same time, it suggests a background where this interpretation can be located and opened to further readings.
23. See also *CI* 121; *SKS* 1, 172-173.
24. Cf. Marvin T. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1964.
25. *New Comedy* and *Old Comedy*, together with *Middle Comedy*, were the different stages in which Hellenistic scholars divided Attic comedy. It is traditionally accepted that, apart from some "technical" features, the main differences between New and Old comedy had to do with the themes they treated and the style. Old comedy was concerned with the polis, which implied political satire, and made use of obscene language. New comedy, aroused after the decline of the Athenian polis, focused rather on domestic matters and abandoned both political satire and obscene language.
26. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 5.
27. It is problematic to present the issue with these terms, since they seem to suggest a radical division between a modern and a pre-modern experience of the comic, which historically would not always apply. Therefore, it must be cautiously used and just accepted for the sake of the argument.
28. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1968, p. 62. I refer to Bakhtin's work as an excellent analysis of the *confiscation* that modernity makes of the comic experience. In his work, Bakhtin confronts the duplicity of the pre-modern comic experience with the modern one-sided conception of the comic.